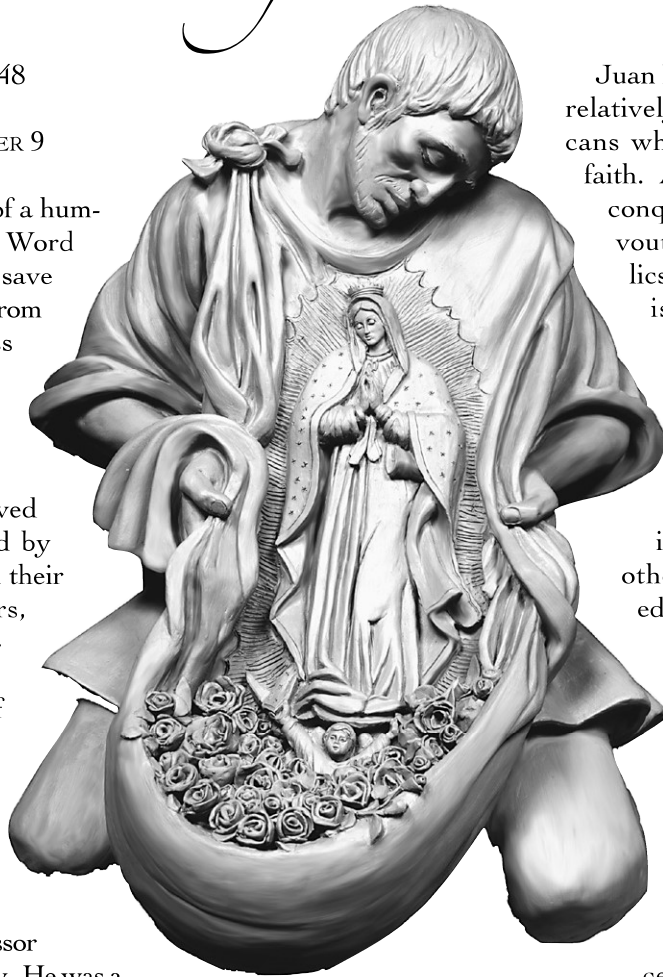


St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin

BORN 1474; DIED 1548
CONFESSOR
FEAST DAY: DECEMBER 9

FROM THE WOMB of a humble woman, the Word of God came to save the world. And from the obedient witness of a humble man, St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin, the indigenous people of Mexico received the salvation gained by that Word and, with their Spanish conquerors, became a single nation under the mantle of the Mother of God.

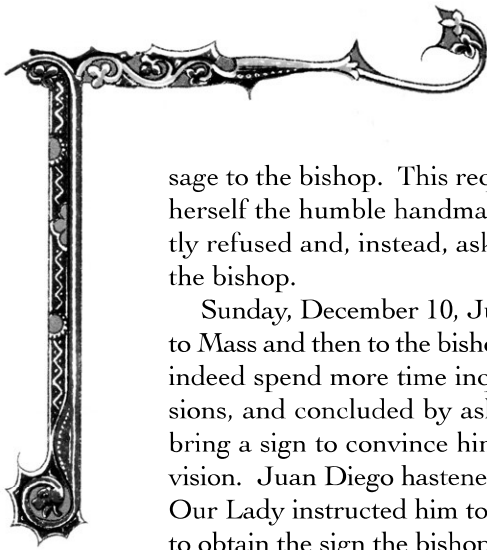
Cuauhtlatotzin, “the talking eagle,” was born in a town about fourteen miles from Tenichtitlan, predecessor to today’s Mexico City. He was a member of the Chichimeca people of Mexico, and was already forty-five years old when Hernán Cortés and his small band of Spanish soldiers came and overthrew the Aztec empire and its religious practices of massive human sacrifice. Little is known of his life. He was a prosperous member of the middle class, a citizen of the Aztec empire, received some education, and was given to reflection on spiritual and philosophical matters. In 1524, when he was fifty, he was baptized and took the name Juan Diego. His wife and other members of his family were probably also baptized then. His wife’s Christian name was Maria Lucia and his uncle’s Juan Bernardino. Maria Lucia died in 1529, and Juan Diego then moved to his uncle’s town.



*St. Juan Diego,
by Timothy Schmalz*

Juan Diego was among the relatively few native Americans who had accepted the faith. Although the original conquerors had been devout and faithful Catholics, many of the Spanish who came later were rapacious and cruel, treating Juan Diego and his countrymen as little better than slaves and alienating those who might otherwise have accepted with open hearts the Word of God.

The great event with which Juan Diego will ever be linked began early on the morning of December 9, 1531, then the date of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (it is now December 8). Fifty-seven-year-old Juan Diego was on a journey of some nine miles, probably to morning Mass, when Our Lady appeared to him on Tepeyac Hill near Mexico City. Mary revealed to him her identity, and asked him to go to the bishop to request that a shrine be built there as a place of pilgrimage, consolation, and healing. He did as she asked, but Bishop Juan de Zumárraga did not believe Juan Diego. He asked Juan Diego to return at a later time, and that in the meantime he would give the matter thought. Juan Diego returned that afternoon and again encountered Our Lady, begging that she send a more worthy person than his own unimportant self to carry her mes-



sage to the bishop. This request Our Lady she, herself the humble handmaid of the Lord, gently refused and, instead, asked him to return to the bishop.

Sunday, December 10, Juan Diego first went to Mass and then to the bishop, who this time did indeed spend more time inquiring about the visions, and concluded by asking Juan Diego to bring a sign to convince him of the truth of the vision. Juan Diego hastened to Tepeyac, where Our Lady instructed him to return the next day to obtain the sign the bishop had requested. On returning home, he discovered that his uncle was critically ill, so he instead spent the next day caring for his uncle who, that night, asked Juan Diego to go for a priest to hear his last confession and anoint him for death. He set off immediately and, approaching Tepeyac hill, went around the other side to avoid Our Lady so that he might not be delayed in fulfilling his uncle's need for the sacraments. Of course, he was met by Mary anyway, and he apologized for not meeting her because of his uncle's mortal illness. She reassured him that his uncle had been cured — she had appeared to him after Juan Diego had already left on his journey — and then told him to go to the top of the hill to gather the flowers blooming there. (The record of the apparitions indicates that there was a frost that night, and the hill had never been known to grow anything but acacias and mesquites.) He brought gloriously fragrant roses down in his tilma (a cloak-like garment made of plant fiber), and Our Lady sent him to the bishop. As he opened his tilma before the bishop and allowed the flowers to fall to the floor, on the tilma appeared a nearly life-size image of the vision he had seen on Tepeyac. When Juan Bernardino described his own vision of Our Lady, he testified that she had given him the proper title for the image on Juan Diego's tilma: The Perfect Virgin Holy Mary of Guadalupe. "Guadalupe" is the name of a Marian shrine

in Spain — the way Our Lady chose to communicate that Mexico was one nation, native and Spanish, not two.



The exchanges between Our Lady and Juan Diego are among the most tender and intimate ever recorded. Following the apparitions, Juan Diego lived for another seventeen years in a small room built onto one wall of the new chapel at Tepeyac, as the tilma's guardian and as a living witness for the pilgrims to the holy site. Eight million of Juan Diego's countrymen were baptized in the seven years following the apparitions, the greatest number of conversions in such a short period of time in the history of the Church. Millions now visit the basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe annually, reverencing the tilma which still exists there as a sign of this unique appearance of Our Lady to a humble man. From humble beginnings, God builds great things.

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